

The Time Between by Jezebel_Jones

Series: [This World \[1\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Sam Owens (Stranger Things), Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler

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Summary:

Beginning of a Rated M series, though this can stand alone for those who aren't interested in later polyamory. This begins the moment El closes the gate and ends the night of the Snow Ball. We're going to get into some heads, and explore all the work that goes into letting El live the most normal life possible. Where Jim Hopper realizes some things are still going to be completely out of his control.

Updated every Friday. Sometimes sooner.

1. Wherein Jim Hopper Realizes He's Just the Muscle

It stayed in his head, even as he was shooting, that he would need to hide her quickly as soon as she closed the gate.

And when *they*, whoever *they* truly were, asked how that rift in the ground sealed itself shut, he would shrug and say that torching the source and where it spread seemed to do the trick, but his priority was to come rescue Dr. Owens since it was taking them so damn long to bother.

He trusted Dr. Owens. His instincts didn't normally steer him wrong, and an ally on the inside was something he owed El. Hell, everyone in this endearing shithole of a town and maybe even the country owed her. Maybe even the world.

She was incandescent. Literally. For a moment, he thought they were both going to ignite. Heroes went out in a blaze of fire more often than not, but not this time.

Not his girl.

Then it was over. Her body dropped faster than he could catch her.

"You did good, kid. You did so good." He let himself hold her for another few seconds, before his adrenaline thought to wane. "I need to hide you quickly."

"No, please. They know. No more hiding," she sobbed into his shoulder.

"I need to get you away from *here* quickly. To Joyce's. Before the cavalry comes. You need to be gone. And I need to come back to get help for Dr. Owens since help is taking too goddamn long."

"Oh," she breathed. Her brain was turning back on.

"I know you're tired, and I can carry you, but if you can leg it—" He felt the platform move up, and quickly. He tried to stop himself from chuckling. "Save it for running."

“Sure,” she said, looking to her right. They were already there. He helped her dismount, and she was surprisingly steady on her feet. He couldn’t treat her like the child she was right now, but as a fellow officer, knowing what needed to get done. She looked back at him. “There.” She pointed to the elevator. “I can make it work.”

He stopped the refusal from leaving his mouth. It would be so much quicker. The electricity flickered ominously on, but never long enough. Which was fine by him. And if anyone was coming, they would take the stairs. He motioned with his gun and nodded. She ran.

She made it work. Effortlessly. And as soon as they made it to his truck, she tilted her head back on the seat and closed her eyes.

Hopper was half pissed and half relieved help hadn’t arrived. He wanted to make it back to Dr. Owens before it did.

The closer he got to Joyce’s, the more he could breathe. This group of *losers*, every single one of them, had been imperative to getting this done. The stupid fucking strategy of it, the earnestness, cleverness, all there even *before* El came in, looking like something out of every mother’s goddamn nightmare. It humbled him. They would all need to sit down with him and discuss strategy some more because even though they knew about El, he wasn’t sure what sort of government shitstorm was about to rain down on Hawkins. And El deserved more than just to be hidden away, especially if they were still careful and not stupid.

He turned into the dark driveway leading up to Joyce’s house, and the lights hit that Wheeler kid as he ran off the porch. He pulled the passenger door open before the truck came to a stop. Hopper bit his tongue.

“Is she okay?” He asked as he looked at the blood caked on her face.

He didn’t answer until he made is way over himself, nudging the kid out of the way. “She will be. Go clear off somewhere I can lay her. Somewhere *quiet*.” He pulled her out and cradled her. She was heavier than Will.

“Mrs. Byers said to put her in her bed with Will. She said you would probably need to do some police stuff—”

“Run ahead and make sure everyone stays quiet while I bring her in.”

“Oh! Yeah, of course!” He took off.

Hopper smiled as the kid yelled into an already quiet house. One of the kids opened the door solemnly and he had to shift in sideways to not clip her head. The hallway was even more narrow, but Joyce’s room was close. He could hear the kids swarming behind him. He would try to be nice.

“I need to get clean.”

Hopper looked down. Her eyes were open, but they didn’t look focused. He smiled down at her. She was worried about creature comforts. That made him feel a lot better.

Joyce was sitting on the bed, next to a sleeping Will. She stood. “Bring her over here, Hop.” She stood.

A Hopper went to lay El down, she squirmed until he put her on her feet. She went straight to Joyce’s arms. “I want to get clean.”

“Of course, Sweetie.” She looked at Hopper. “Go. I’ll take care of her, okay?” She put her hand against his cheek.

He closed his eyes. “If someone comes—”

“If someone comes, they’ve got to get through a line of children who aren’t afraid to take on fucking monsters from a board game. No one will take her,” Joyce said emphatically.

He loved Mama Bear Joyce. “I’m not worried about her being taken. I don’t want anyone to know of her existence. I don’t want anyone to catch wind that she was a part of this.”

“I know how to hide.” El looked back at him. “And I know how to find you.”

He blinked a few times. “Right, okay. I’m just being paranoid.” He

pulled El to his chest. "I love you, kid. I'll be back soon."

She shook her head. "No, not soon. I hate that word. It's stupid."

He sighed. "I know, I know. I'll check in every chance I get—"

"Actually, that might be a good idea. If they are monitoring calls, then you can create a different story."

Hopper looked back at the Wheeler kid and sighed. These fucking kids. These fucking genius kids. He nodded. "As soon as I get Dr. Owens to the ER, I'll call you from the phone there. Just follow my lead. Come on, kid, I need to talk to the rest of you while Joyce gets El settled. He gave El and Joyce one more backward glance. El was looking past him, but Joyce had her eyes trained to him. "Go," she said. He nodded again, and grabbed the kid by his scruff and led him back to the living room. Well, dragged him.

Which was less of a mess, and they were still picking it up. Steve and Jonathan were finishing up a tarp on the window. The inside and the outside.

He cleared his throat, hand on Mike's shoulder. "Okay. Has everyone called their parents?"

Everyone spoke at once, but it seemed like they had.

He pointed to Nancy. "What's the official story?"

"A surprise early high school initiation," she said.

"Right. Because if you'd said Will had some sort of episode or was ill, she would have brought a casserole." Smart kids.

"And it also helped explain why Mike and I were hanging out together. I told her we'd be home sometime tomorrow afternoon. Give us all a chance to rest."

"Good, good." He looked around the room and landed on the new girl. "And did your parents buy that?"

She didn't say anything for a second and he followed her gaze to a

body on the floor. It looked like it had been dragged out of the way with the help of a throw rug.

“Who in the Hell is that?” He pointed at her and glared at everyone else when everyone started to speak. “Just you.”

“He’s my step-brother. He came to get me, but he started to push Lucas around, so Steve hit him. But Billy grabbed a plate and broke it over Steve’s head, and he just kept hitting him. So, I stuck him in the neck with that needle.” She pointed to the counter where she got it.

Hopper looked over at Steve. His face was a mess. “Do you need to go to the hospital?”

Steve laughed. “Probably. But I can let it go for a bit until things settle.”

Hopper nodded and looked back at the red-haired girl. “What did you tell your parents?”

“I told her about the initiation, and she spoke with Mrs. Byers for a minute. I told her Billy just left, so they think he’s off somewhere else. I was sort of hoping you could maybe...scare him?”

“Scare him?”

“Yeah, so he leaves me and my friends alone.”

“I was planning on taking him in.”

She shook her head rapidly. “No, my step-dad is horrible to him. I mean, I know that Billy should know better at this point, but I think it would just make everything...unless Steve really wants to—”

Steve shook his head. “I don’t give a shit. I think I kinda owe Red, so whatever she wants, and you, of course.” He cleared his throat. “Sir.”

Hopper looked at both of them and thought he had the gist of it. But fuck, he really wanted to take that fucker in and put the fear of God into him. “Okay, that’s fine. I need—” A cotton ball with ammonia was put in his hands. “—that. I need that. Thank you.”

“We were just about to get him out of here,” Jonathan said. “Violently.”

Hopper chuckled and knelt down. He wanted to be the only thing in his line of vision once his eyes opened. He pressed the cotton under his nose.

Billy closed his eyes as soon as he opened them. “You called the fucking cops, Shitbird?”

“No, she did not call the fucking cops. This fucking cop, the fucking chief of police, came to see how their initiation was going. I come in here and find out that you’re terrorizing middle-schoolers. That’s the most pathetic thing I’ve ever heard. And the more I think about it, the more pissed off I get, so you need to leave now.” He yanked Billy upwards.

“I’m not leaving without Maxine.”

“Yes, you are. Maxine has already called her mother, and you’re off the hook. So leave.”

Billy stood, a bit wobbly, and it looked like he wanted to ask a question, but thought better of it.

“I’m not taking you in because I don’t think it will do any good. This hasn’t taught you any lessons. I’m not going to waste this lovely evening filling out paperwork on some punk who can’t self-regulate his own testosterone. But I’ll be checking in with these kids everyday. And if I hear that you’re harassing children again, I’ll know. Now, get the fuck out.”

Billy left. After a moment, you could hear him swearing profusely, and Hopper was going to see what the fuck his problem was now, but then he heard a quiet, “Oops”, come from Maxine. He turned to look at her, and she looked slightly ashamed. “We might’ve taken Billy’s car to try to distract the demo-dogs, so that maybe it would clear the way for El better.”

“Goddamn it,” Hopper sat heavily on the sofa. “Anything else?”

“I probably hit a mailbox or two, but it’s not my fault. Steve woke up

and was freaking out—”

“Did it work?” Mike interrupted. “Were there any demo-dogs left?”

“There weren’t any until we got to the gate, then they just all took off. Then Jonathan came on and said to close it, so as much as I want to scream at each of you, I think you probably helped Will, too. We were able to get down there and she had a pretty good handle on it when they started to return. I was able to rain gunfire on them, then this massive thing came right for her, through the gate, and she started fucking screaming and levitating, and I thought she was done for. But it didn’t stand a chance. She wasn’t going to let it.”

“God, that’s just like last year. She just wasn’t going to let it,” Lucas said.

“And this thing was a lot bigger, and she didn’t bother trying to kill it. She just banished it before it could retrieve its soldiers. Hopefully she scared the shit out of it.” Hopper stood back up and reached for his wallet.

“Jonathan, here’s some cash. Go grab some groceries. We have a lot of mouths to feed. The rest of you are going to finish up the mess. I need to go get Dr. Owens. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, but save a couch for me. I want to sleep closest to the door.”

“I’m going too. I’m going to go get bedding and clothes for Mike and me. I can bring something back for you Max.” Nancy looked for her nod.

“Good idea. Joyce has El covered. The rest of you can take showers and we can put your clothes in the wash. Just wrap up the mess in here first.”

“I can’t believe Dr. Owen’s still alive,” Mike said.

Hopper walked to the fridge hoping there was beer he could knock back. “I know. He’s pretty roughed up, though. I’m pissed that no one has gone to get him. It’s unacceptable. So, I’m going back for him.”

“Oh shit.” Dustin stepped backwards as Hopper opened the door.

“What the fuck? Who the fuck? Oh my God, you little miscreants.” Hopper hauled the dead demo-dog out of the fridge.

“It’s for science!” Dustin went over to grab it.

“And it will never see the light of day. They won’t let it. It will just be more for them to cover up and we need them in and out of this town as fast as possible. This will make them stick around, bug our houses, and keep El isolated.” Hopper took it outside and threw it in an old rusted trash can, and lit it on fire. “Keep an eye on that fire. Hopefully I’ll be back soon. If anyone comes, radio me immediately. Understood? Remember: you know nothing, and El isn’t here.”

After all their nods, Hopper walked back to his truck.

Notes for the Chapter:

So...yeah? This is working?

The initiation. When I was in 8th grade, a few high-schoolers rounded up a bunch of us, blind-folded us, loaded us in the back of a truck, hosed us down, and dumped eggs, mustard, ketchup, and flour on us. I can't remember what else. I don't know if this is something people do anymore.

2. In Which We Bathe, Dine, and Take Our Medicine

Summary for the Chapter:

Um. Things got a bit chatty and weird.

“I could strangle Hop for not telling me. For nearly a year!” Joyce had her fingers in El’s hair, rubbing in some conditioner as she sat in the tub. “We’ll give this a few minutes, then you can stand so we can rinse you off.” Joyce had gotten as much blood and dirt off at the start with a quick shower, but once that was done, she filled the tub with warm soapy water so El could rest while she tackled that hair. After getting all that gel out, it needed a good conditioning.

“Okay,” El whispered. “He said ‘soon’ all the time, but it never came. It felt like...a lie.”

“He’s not a bad guy. He’s just extra cautious. He had a little girl once—” She wasn’t sure if it was her place, or even the right time.

“He told me about her on the way to the lab. We had a good talk. I understand things better, and I think he does, too. We’re...okay now.” She was hesitant to say that since he didn’t know about Chicago, yet.

“I’m glad. I think you’re good for each other. But don’t worry, since I know now, we’ll sneak you over here on my days off. Or I can go to the cabin, though I think less traffic to there, the better. But, there’s no reason you need to be alone. Sometimes having another girl to talk to would be great. I mean, I love my boys, but it’s two against one most days.”

Eleven laughed and wiped the tears starting to fall. “I would like that. Thank you.” She’d never been cared for quite like this. She liked it too much.

Joyce smiled, though it didn’t reach her eyes. El thought she looked sad and tired, but Joyce still wanted to care for her. It wasn’t a dynamic she was used to. “Alright. Up you get. Rinse off while I grab you something warm to wear to bed. Do you mind sleeping with Will? I want to be able to keep an eye on you both.”

"I don't mind." They hadn't officially met, but she felt like she knew him best of all.

"I'm sure Mike will be in there, too. He's barely left Will's side through all of this, and now that you're back, well, having you both together will make it easier on him, too."

Her stomach did a little flip. "Mike is a good friend. He taught me how to be a friend." El stepped under the warm water and let it drown out everything else.

"Well, he is that." Joyce watched her for a moment to make sure she wouldn't fall, then stepped out of the room and made sure to keep her smile in place. She found Mike freshly washed sitting across from Will, both eating what appeared to be peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. She sighed and let her face relax into a natural smile. "I didn't realize how long we'd been in there." She walked over to Will and touched his forehead. He let her. "Just a little clammy. You feeling okay?"

"Starving," he said, with his mouth full.

"Good." Joyce walked over to her dresser and pulled out a well worn long flannel nightgown, and some underwear she thought might fit.

"I made El a sandwich and milk, too." Mike motioned to the side table. She also noticed his pillow and sleeping bag on the floor. "Can I sleep in here, too?"

Joyce snorted. "Like I can stop you. Where's everyone ending up?"

Mike blushed. "Steve, Nancy, and Jonathan are still up, and Max called dibs on Will's bed, so Dustin and Lucas are in with her. They're all taking turns with the shower, and Jonathan made up a bunch of sandwiches."

She had no idea what she'd do without Jonathan. "Okay, good." Joyce knocked on the bathroom door to let El know she was coming back in.

Nancy was having a bit of a crisis. Like one of those ‘if it was the last day on Earth, what would you do’ type scenarios. *What would she do?* The thought was hysterical and terrifying and improbable. *Were people allowed to be this selfish?*

“Nance, stop pacing.” Steve was getting dizzy watching her. He’d done nothing but watch her for the last half hour. After her shower, she had tended to his face and declared he was still pretty. But she seemed to be thinking way too hard and all the hard stuff had already been done that evening. So, he could only guess, and he wasn’t in the mood for that. He was feeling a little numb, but nice. It was a new feeling.

Jonathan stopped tidying the kitchen to watch her. Her eyes met his and she could see both resignation and curiosity. An odd mix, but he perfected it. She had to admit to herself what she wanted and she couldn’t drag it out. “I’m going to bed. I want the both of you with me. Don’t ask me any questions because I don’t know the answer. I’m sorry. I love you both. I *want* you both. Just...just give me tonight, alright? I just want to sleep. I know it’s unfair and selfish to even ask it. But I just don’t care. After today, I just don’t care.” Nancy looked at them both quickly, then turned and walked down the hall to Jonathan’s room. She shut the door behind her, and put her hand over her mouth to stop the hysterical laugh from leaving her throat. She almost didn’t care if they followed because she was tired, so tired, but now they knew. And the relief of it was staggering.

“So, like, what’s the word that’s like worse than ‘awkward’?” Steve asked rhetorically.

“Um, Nancy probably knows,” Jonathan said after clearing his throat. He didn’t know what he actually expected to happen with Nancy when they got back. She hadn’t mentioned much about Steve except that short conversation at Murray Bauman’s before they’d spent the night together. And that small bit in the motel room when she got pissed at him. But, he’d hoped she’d want to be with him. And apparently, she did. But it was a package deal. Jonathan was a little relieved that Steve seemed to be having just as much trouble wrapping his head around it as he was.

The manic edge to Steve's laugh was a little comforting. "You're right. She would know. *Christ*. Nancy Wheeler. Nancy *fucking* Wheeler. What the fuck do we do? I thought fighting the monster last year was about as insane as it got, then tonight happened, and now I know I was so wrong. So, so wrong." He laughed again. He never liked Jonathan. Before Nancy, he wouldn't have been able to pick him out of a line up. But Nancy seemed to always have such a soft spot for him. After the experience last year, he couldn't even fault her for wanting him as a friend because that shit was insane. Still, he saw the way they looked at each other. Safe, sweet, predictable Nancy had turned it all upside down. He was impressed. Exhausted and woozy, pain around the edges, but impressed.

"She said 'tonight' and 'just sleep'. It's still kind of a lot to ask for, but I'm just...tired. I don't know what to think." Jonathan blew the bangs out of his eyes. His hair was almost dry.

Steve laughed again. "I'm likely concussed, so I'll have two people to monitor me."

Jonathan cracked a smile, but didn't look at him. "That's one way to look at it, I guess. Did you need help walking?" He glanced over quickly.

"I'm good, I think." He stood. "Can I have the middle?"

Was he serious? "I don't think that's what Nancy had in mind." Jonathan was still trying to make all the logical points connect in his head, but Nancy had left him...flummoxed. Steve wasn't helping.

"Well, that would be funny. Did you want to play the doctor or the nurse? There are male nurses, did you know?" Steve put his hand on the wall to catch himself. The end of the hall was so *far*.

Jonathan grabbed his arm and put it around his neck. "What are you on? Have you been drinking?"

"Water. One of the shitheads gave me something for my head and it is so working. Like I don't even hate you right now."

Jonathan knocked on Will's bedroom door. He knew there was

another girl roaming around and didn't want to scare her. The bedroom and bathroom door opened at the same time. Dustin just out of the bath, and Max and Lucas in Will's room. "What medicine was Steve given?" He needed to make sure it was just the medication that was affecting Steve and not some sort of brain damage.

Dustin stepped closer. "Mrs. Byers said to give him something out of the small orange bottle from the medicine cabinet. I gave him two. My mom always takes two when she gets a migraine." Dustin waved his hands in front of Steve's face. He was grinning stupidly. "Why? Is he okay?" All three kids were looking at him like they'd broke him.

There was no point in chastising the kid. He was only trying to help. "Just high as a kite. He'll be alright. I'm going to get him to bed." He walked the few steps to his bedroom door and opened it. Nancy was clearly lying in the middle of the bed.

"Wait, so...what just happened?" Lucas pointed to Jonathan's door. They barely heard it shut, but they definitely heard the lock.

Dustin rubbed his hands together. "This is an interesting development."

"Is it, though? After everything tonight, is anything going to be surprising? How do you even do...life after something like this?" Max realized she was getting a little shrill at the end.

"You alright, MadMax?" Lucas almost reached for her hand.

She nodded. "I mean, I'm not dead, or possessed, or bleeding from my ears. That's got to be good, right? I'm really good at perspective." She sounded more like she was trying to convince herself than anyone else.

Lucas hesitantly grabbed her hand anyway. "Let's get you tucked in, Max. Perspective will still be there in the morning."

She didn't fight him. She crawled into Will's bed, clothed in Nancy's pajamas, and twisted her hair behind her head. Lucas raised an eyebrow and she smiled at him. "Hurry up, Stalker, I can't sleep with

the light on.”

“Patience you must have, my young Padawan.”

Max rolled her eyes. “Jesus, I forget what a nerd you are sometimes.”

Lucas was pleased he was able to distract her. “Dustin, which side do you want?” He pulled Will’s sleeping bag from the closet and shook it out. He laid it on the floor parallel to the bed. They’d already made one pallet on the other side with Jonathan’s sleeping bag.

“I don’t care. I’m going to check on Will and Eleven. You kids don’t stay up too late.” He lingered at the door for a moment, trying to catch Lucas’ eye, but all he got was a questioning look from Max. He sighed heavily. He was giving them more time alone, the least he could get was a wink. *Come on, now.* He closed the door with a huff.

“I don’t think there’s another person on the planet who is anything like Dustin Henderson. That guy needs his own trademark.” Max rolled onto her stomach and propped her head up with her arms.

Lucas laughed. “No truer words.”

“One day he’s going to get a girlfriend—”

“I *know*.”

“She’s going to be something else. She has to be.” She shook her head, trying to imagine such a creature.

“But she’s not in Hawkins. His princess is in another castle.” Lucas turned off the light and went to lie down. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to sleep, but now that he was down, he knew he wouldn’t have a problem.

“Unless there are more girls from the lab hiding in the woods.”

Dustin aside, the weight of that thought was smothering. *There must’ve been ten more at least. But that ‘0’. It’s not binary. Maybe there’s hundreds.* “Finding one girl in the woods is about all the excitement I can take.”

“Hm.” She was silent for a moment. She didn’t want him to think she was hurt, even though she was just a little bit. More confused, really. “Why doesn’t she like me?”

He had wondered about that, but only saw it as a temporary thing. “Honestly, I think it’s jealousy.”

“What? That makes no sense.”

“Sure it does. You’re a girl. You’re new. You can see us whenever you want. You have access to Mike.”

“But Mike hates—”

“Mike treats you like I treated her. We can be pretty immature, but at the end of it, we molt like D’Art.”

“And become more hungry and vicious?”

“Or more docile when given candy, whichever. My point is, she’s been poorly socialized. She probably doesn’t even know the definition of jealousy. She just sees *you* where *she* wants to be.”

“Ah, but she was prevented. So basically, she’s actually a little more socialized than you think because I’m still alive.”

“Perspective,” he conceded. He reached up to touch her, realizing he could probably land anywhere, so he aimed for the top of her head. That should be safe.

She snorted. “Perspective. Right.” She squeezed his hand, then swatted it away. “Goodnight, Lucas.”

He smiled, tempted to touch her again. “Goodnight, Max.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Small hiccup. The "his princess is in another castle" doesn't come out until 1985. But, IDC. I'm about to go hunt down my old Nintendo.

Also, have flu. Edits made while medicated.

AND WHY can't I figure out why Ch. 1's note repeats
on Ch. 2? WHY

3. And Superheroes are not Forgotten

Summary for the Chapter:

Will. El. Mike.

Dustin.

Gross talk. Cuddles. Comfort.

“Will.” Her breath brought a charge to the room as soon as she stepped in it, and Mike scrambled off the bed, inelegantly, but no less magnetic. In less than a second, he was standing by her side, grabbing her hand, and guiding her to the bed. “Mike,” she breathed out a laugh. Her attention wanted Will, but Mike. *Mike*.

“Yeah?” His eyes and ears, and everything else, only for her.

She didn’t have anything important to say. She felt a hundred things wanting to escape her mouth, but they were like a different language and she wasn’t fluent. “I’m...okay.”

He exhaled as he sat her down, fingers never quite detaching. “I don’t even know how that’s possible, but I’m so glad. I just...God.”

“I understand. You know that.”

“Yeah, I guess I do.” He didn’t know much else. He was fine with that.

“*Will*.” She reached for him as soon as she spoke, and he grabbed her hand just for a moment, the same way she’d grabbed his before, so she knew he hadn’t forgotten. She pulled him toward her, and he laughed, relieved, as she wrapped her arms around him.

Mike plopped down on the bed in front of them both, something warm and foreign twisted its way from the pit of his stomach and strangled his voice. He reached out, hand connecting awkwardly with El’s collarbone, and she mercifully curled her hand around his as she still held onto Will. “It’s weird to have you both in the same...universe—”

She felt a current run through her at Will's laughter and Mike's touch, and the lights flickered once, but the sound of the door opened, so loud to her ears, and she blinked her eyes back open to see the light, and Will's still smiling face. "When you put it like that, yeah. It is weird."

The door closed.

"Hey now, I want in on this."

Dustin.

El wasn't sure what just happened, but she didn't feel bad or scared. She just felt...home. And happy. Her senses were a little overwhelmed. She turned to see Mike looking at her, and Dustin barreling toward them. She was tempted to slow him down, but Will looked ready to take the brunt of it. And God, she was tired.

Mike had the good sense to hold his shirt back, so Will could live to see another day, but still a second later, all four fell heavily backwards on Joyce's bed.

"Where's Lucas?" Will asked.

"I'm letting him and Max have some alone time."

"In my bed!?" Will nearly shrieked.

Eleven understood what an awkward silence was, even if she didn't have a name for it. Lucas and the new girl were in Will's bed together? Oh. Oh. She felt a hundred times better than she had before. Lighter. Relieved. She might have better words later. Maybe after she kissed Mike. Which she suddenly wanted to do. She twisted her neck to see if it was possible. It wasn't. She would make it possible.

"I don't think they're...I mean, do you think they really could be?" Mike asked.

"We almost *died*. Of course they are."

Mike sighed. "Dustin, you aren't helping."

“I don’t want to lie—”

Will interrupted. “But my bed is really loud.”

Another long silence. El then understood what they were listening for.

“So, they’re on the floor, then,” Dustin placated.

El felt Will’s relieved exhale against her neck. “That actually makes me feel a bit better.”

Dustin gasped in horror. “Really? Lucas is going to lose his virginity to a scary girl on the floor of your room, and you feel better?”

Will nodded. “I don’t think Max is scary. She’s nice and pretty.”

“I can’t stand her,” Mike said unnecessarily.

“Why not?”

“What did she do to you?”

Mike shrugged at both Will and Dustin’s questions. “Nothing personal. She’s just always around and we’ve all been dealing with some really serious shit, and just her needing to know everything because her being around our Party required a lot of knowledge she really doesn’t need to know, and now that she knows, she’s stuck with us now. Even if she never speaks to us again, she knows. It’s heavy shit to carry.”

“Wow Mike, that’s the least asshole thing you’ve ever said about her.” Will burrowed back into El’s neck.

El was still listening. She was paying close attention to what was being said about Max. She felt Mike nod against the top of her head. His fingers skimmed up and down her arm, from her elbow to her shoulder. She wondered if he knew he was doing it. “I should probably talk to her. Apologize. Tell her she’s in if she wants. I mean, she was in this shit with the rest of us, and got shit done. Though I’ll wait until tomorrow.” El felt him shudder as Dustin and Will laughed.

They looked a sight. El lying backwards, half on Mike and half on the bed. Will curled up against her on his side, and Dustin on his back with all limbs spread out taking up half the bed. El's eyes were drifting comfortably closed, but the sound of Dustin's purr shocked a laugh out of all of them. Then some groans.

The bathroom door opened, and Joyce stepped out in her own pajamas. She was putting a towel in her hair, though the sight of them made her pause and smile. "If you all fall asleep like that, you'll regret it." She noticed the sandwich and milk on her bed side table. "And Eleven needs to eat."

She was starving, though she'd rather sleep. They all sat up simultaneously, Mike grabbing El's sandwich for her. She smiled at him in thanks.

"I'm going to the couch. Come get me if you need anything." She walked over to Will and pressed her lips to his forehead.

"I'm fine, Mom," Will huffed.

"And I believe it." She ruffled Mike and Dustin's hair, and pressed a kiss to Eleven's.

Once she was out of the room, Dustin spoke. "Do you think they're done? I'm tired."

It took a few moments before both Mike and Will groaned. "Look, they aren't doing anything."

"How do you know?"

Mike realized he was being wound up. "If they are, you get Will's bed then, don't you?"

"I do," Dustin said excitedly. As soon as he turned to the door, he heard a rhythmic squeaking from behind him. He turned back, loading up both middle fingers. But, he was frozen in place. El quit bouncing, but both Will and Mike looked at her, impressed and horrified.

"But you're my nice innocent friend!" Dustin sputtered, "How do you

even know about this stuff?”

“I know a lot.” She raised an eyebrow. “T.V. Soaps. Erica Kane.”

“Yikes, Mike. Those guys from soap operas are a tough act to follow,” Dustin said, dodging a pillow.

She didn’t know what he meant right that second, but she turned just as red as Mike the next, when he went to pick his pillow up and push Dustin out of the room.

Will lied back dramatically. “God, he exhausts me.”

El nodded, finishing up her sandwich.

“I’ll take our dishes back to the kitchen, and get some water. You both need to stay hydrated.” Mike stood and gathered up their cups and plates.

“Yes, Mother.” Will put his hands behind his head, and gave him a cheeky grin.

El thought he was adorable, and nearly told him. She didn’t stop him when he pulled her down and hugged her to him. “You’d better hurry back, before we get lonely and bored.”

Mike grinned at him back. “It is so good to have you back, Byers. God, the *both* of you. Right here.”

She didn’t understand why his words felt so heavy and made her heart beat in a way that was both unfamiliar and all too welcome.

Will snickered as Mike nearly fell over himself as he opened the door. He yawned, and El turned over, half on top of him, and stared. He smiled. “I can’t believe you’re really here. Mike’s been...well, I just hope you know what you mean to him.” He finished with a frown, and El rolled off of him.

Mike walked in and looked at the both of them. The air in the room seemed to thin. El hummed and nodded, and looked at Will. “I do know. You don’t have to worry.”

“Have to worry about what?” Mike asked.

“About me leaving again. I don’t plan to.” Her eyes were wide and innocent, and so believable.

But Mike remembered that she hadn’t really planned to the last time. He didn’t say anything as he turned the lights out and crawled into his sleeping bag.

She’d wanted to kiss him, but she’d said something wrong. It didn’t take her long to figure out what might make him more cautious around her. And she would have none of it. She reached down to feel for his hand, and he sought hers once his sleeping bag moved.

His gasp and quick breaths were what she needed to hear as she pressed her mouth to the back of his hand. Then to his palm twice because she liked his hand against her face. She wasn’t expecting to feel his hand yanked back with hers. Nor his lips against the back of her hand over and over again, resting there as she drifted off to sleep.

Jumping on Bob and ripping out his chest was a lot easier than one would think. He wasn’t a small man, but apparently he was fairly easy to take down. He was proud that he was able share his prey with the others.

They helped drown out the screams of his mother.

Will woke with a stifled shout, and a small arm reaching around him to pull him toward a neck. Her neck. “Shhh. It’s okay. It was just a dream.”

“No, it wasn’t,” he choked.

“Oh, a memory?” She wiped the tears from his cheek as she held him against her.

“I think so, but not as me.” He pressed his face against her neck to stifle a wail.

El felt a body curve to her back and two arms come around to hold the boy in her arms. “Bad dream?” Mike asked, voice full of sleep.

“Bob. I killed Bob in my dream.”

“You were tranquilized. You shouldn’t have...”

“Apparently, I do. Only one put him down, but more came. Mom screamed the whole time,” Will cried.

“Bob is a fucking superhero, Will. Each one of us would be dead if it hadn’t been for him.” Mike’s voice was harsh, but he wasn’t going to let Will wallow in guilt.

“He made my mom so happy.”

“And his death gave her the strength to get that monster out of you. She was pissed. And it didn’t stand a chance.”

El listened to Mike whisper to Will, felt his arms moving, knowing his hands were comforting Will, just as hers were. She moved one hand up higher, and Mike moved his over hers and twined their fingers together. She pressed her nose to his cheek and her lips brushed his jaw. She wanted to spend every moment, exactly like they were just then, and she didn’t understand why.

Will pulling away nearly made her complain out loud. As he lied back down, El pulled Mike down behind her. She grabbed Will’s right hand with her left, and she knew that Mike found his other hand with how far it was around her. She used a little bit of power to get the blanket back over them, faltering as Mike’s mouth pressed against the back of her neck. She stopped breathing. She could feel Mike’s left arm wriggle under her pillow, and his left cheek against the back of her neck when he stopped to breathe. He was as close to her as he’d ever been. It felt like their embrace, but so much longer, and it felt like *more*. Exactly how she wanted it. Mike was *more*.

Notes for the Chapter:

I may be shipping folks a little too hard.

4. In Which Jim Hopper Remembers He's Still the Adult in the Room

Summary for the Chapter:

The morning after.

Notes for the Chapter:

You get two chapters since I'm late. I wrote scenes out of order, so ch. 3 wasn't quite ready when I wanted it.

"Joyce, how is it that I leave her here safe with you, and now that I come back, I find her in bed with not one boy, but two, in the middle of two adolescent boys no less, like sardines—" Jim complained as he walked back to the couch after using the bathroom. He got back around 6AM and got a few hours in. The back up didn't show up until well after he got Dr. Owens to the ER. They were apologetic and apparently way underfunded. Transparency was nil. But then it would have to be. He was able to get in a call to Joyce and the station, establishing a solid story if overheard, and the guys who came to check in on Dr. Owens seemed to believe him just fine. They seemed relieved that someone cleaned up their mess. Jim was ready to talk compensation at this point, because this was utterly unacceptable, but no one was waiting in a car for him either. But he'd keep his eyes and ears looking and listening. It was what he was good at.

"—And one of those boys will always be supervising." Joyce was still lying on the other couch. She didn't know if she wanted to sleep more or make coffee. She would yawn either way.

"But which boy, Joyce? Which? Because I thought I knew, but now I can't tell."

Joyce snickered, though she did wonder a few things she would never share with Jim. She went to grab Jonathan's camera earlier, and wasn't prepared to see Nancy and Steve in bed with her son. The boys were topless, but Nancy wasn't, but clothes littered the floor.

She grabbed the camera and tried not to think too hard about it.

El and Will had been forehead to forehead, hands still gripping, and sharing one side of the bed. Mike was on his stomach, both legs hanging off, his mouth gaping and drooling against El's mid-back, and his right arm was draped over her thighs holding onto Will's shirt.

It was the most precious thing she'd ever seen and she used up the rest of Jonathan's film in the camera.

"Let's let them sleep a couple more hours, then we can make lunch. I was going to make coffee, but I feel like I can still sleep." She yawned. It was contagious.

"I hope they sleep 'til supper." Hopper was out less than a minute later.

Jesus. There was a hand on her stomach and something else entirely against her hip. Both of these things belonged to two separate heartbeats against her arm, neither in sync, so taken together made Nancy's heart beat double time.

What was I thinking? She hadn't been. And she wasn't ready. She turned toward Jonathan, dislodging his hand, and Steve's hand came up and curled around her ribs.

Then he moved his hand and groaned, and it wasn't a nice one. She wondered if she should just pretend to sleep, but she remembered that he should've gone to the hospital last night. She ignored her embarrassment and turned her head around. His hands were clutching his head. He looked worse if that were possible. "How are you feeling?"

He was able to open an eye for her. "I don't remember going to bed. Please tell me I didn't black out in the middle of my first threesome. Was I good?"

"Jesus, Steve," Nancy said. How was it that he could still surprise her?

“You totally did, but we didn’t blame you. We took your condition into consideration before judging your performance.”

Nancy whipped her head back around to gape at Jonathan, but had to turn back because laughing made Steve nearly cry in pain. “Jonathan, do you happen to have any more of those lovely pills? Just the one though. What time is it?”

Jonathan stood up and pulled on his shirt. “Just after one. I don’t hear anyone, so I guess everyone is still sleeping it off.” He walked to the door and looked back at Nancy. She was sitting up with her back turned, clearly looking at Steve. “Need anything, Nancy?”

She turned back to him and gave him an awkward smile. “I’m good. Thanks.”

He nodded, stepped out of the room, and closed the door behind him. The air wasn’t any less stifling. Maybe that’s the way it would always be. He would have to make nice with Steve with half his heart outside his chest, or leave it bleeding on the floor. He’d been hurt by Nancy before, but this wasn’t nearly as painful.

Just maybe, then. *Maybe.*

He could hear the coffee pot and walked to the kitchen. His mom and Hopper were sitting at the table sharing a cigarette. She stood up and pulled him into her arms. He didn’t expect it to bring a lump to his throat. He let himself be held. “Is Will okay?”

She pulled away. “He seems so. No fever, less clammy. Sleeping soundly. I might’ve stolen your camera and used the rest of your film on them.”

He didn’t want to think about what she saw, innocent though it was. Well, sort of innocent. “I have plenty.” He grabbed a glass and filled it up with water. “I need to take Steve one of my pills from the dentist. Dustin gave him two last night. Said his mom takes two...” He started walking toward the hall.

Hopper snorted. “How does he look?”

“Worse than last night.”

“Please tell me you got pictures?”

“Nearly a whole roll, Dustin. Please let them sleep.”

Too late.

Waking up with Will in front of her didn't seem as odd as one might think, but the body fully tucked tightly behind her with both arms surrounding her stole her breath.

He noticed. “How are you feeling?”

The whisper danced across her neck. She shivered. “Good, I think.” One of her hands was still tied up with Will's, but Mike's were both loose, so she grabbed one with her free hand.

“I can't believe you've been so close for all this time—”

“I'm sorry.” She sniffed.

“I'm not mad.”

She smiled. “Friends don't lie.”

He huffed out a laugh. “I'm not mad *anymore*. I'm relieved that you've been safe. It would've been nice to know, though. I could've kept you company.”

“I know. Bored. Stir crazy. I had TV, though.”

“TV will rot your brain.”

“That's what Hop says, but my brain is fine.”

“If you say so.” Mike rolled onto his back and stretched.

El made a sound of disappointment, so Mike rolled back over. He laid his cheek against her back and hugged her. She sighed happily, then laughed when Mike's stomach rumbled.

"I could hear that from all the way over here, Mike. That was impressive."

Mike's head popped up and smiled at Will, and he rested his chin against El's arm. "Feeling like yourself today?"

"I feel like I could eat a demodog."

El made a face. She lived in the wild for over a month, and she'd never even dream of eating one.

"Too late for that. Hopper burned the one that was in your fridge." He stood up and stretched further.

"What?" Both El and Will stared at him. Will trying to be subtle, but El not knowing how to be.

Mike blushed. "Um. Dustin wanted to keep the one El sent through the window. Wanted it to be his discovery."

"I'm the one that spit it up. It should be mine. Wait." He looked at El. "You sent one through a window? Am I always going to be either gone or possessed when you do something cool?"

El shrugged, not knowing exactly what he'd want her to do. "I could make you pee your pants."

Mike laughed and pulled her up from the bed.

Will crawled out behind her. "Please, no. Mom will make me see another doctor."

Mike opened the bedroom door. "Turn your head and cough, Mr. Byers."

Will rolled his eyes. "Let me get a meal in first, Dr. Wheeler."

El could hear the sound of forks hitting plates, and smelled syrup. She dragged them both from the room.

“We all need to talk before you go home.”

Jonathan made a big breakfast for a late lunch. Pancakes, eggs, and sausage. The amount of food demolished was impressive. They were all squeezed around the table, some sharing chairs, though Joyce was standing with her hip resting against the counter while she refilled her coffee.

Hopper refused all questions until their stomachs were full, and paying attention. “I got Dr. Owens to the hospital. Called Joyce early this morning to let her know and asked about Will. I also asked about who was still around. Harrington wasn’t mentioned at all by name. Neither was Nancy. Joyce mentioned ‘his friends’—” He pointed to Lucas and Dustin. “—came over to visit Will, but vaguely, so Red can be wrapped up in that if her parents gets asked any questions by authorities. I told them that since all Will’s friends were wrapped up in the drama from last year, they came over to support him, but that I told you to lie to your parents about it. So, I really don’t think they are going to talk to any parents. It would complicate things and they surely don’t want to do that. The story is simple. You, you, and you were here for the initiation.” He pointed at Mike, Max, Dustin, and Lucas. “If someone else tries to talk to you about last night, act scared, and ask to see your parents or me. If they somehow manage to get you alone in some official capacity, repeat the initiation story. Say your eyes were covered so you don’t know who initiated you. Don’t deviate from the story. Chances are they just want to make sure you don’t talk. But I really don’t think they will ask at all. They really don’t have their shit together at all. Now Mike, and this is important. They know you were with Will at the lab and here. Your house is still likely bugged, and that means you don’t change a thing. I know you’ve been talking to El on your supercom. Continue to do so. Don’t deviate. Continue to be sad or whatever. But don’t overdo it.”

It embarrassed Mike to know that Hopper knew, and he avoided everyone’s eyes. Even hers as they bore a hole in him. “I would never endanger her.”

“I know, but it’s easy to slip up. To talk about someone who you aren’t sure is still alive, or even in this dimension, and now she’s sitting next to you. It’s easy to mess up your verb tenses. Don’t talk about her any more or less. People are going to be listening. They

don't know if she's alive or dead, or where she's at."

"And I'll continue to tell you to get over it, Man." Lucas patted his shoulder. "Sorry that I did, though."

Mike just nodded, and looked at Hopper. El put her hand on his knee and he realized he was bouncing it. He tried to stop.

Hopper sighed and looked at El. "Which unfortunately brings me to this. Your friends know you're alive. I will not keep them from you. But for the next couple of weeks, you have to *lay low* and I've got to really pay attention to my job. I need to hear all the gossip, keep track of anything suspicious. I'm going to need all of you to play your parts, but especially you, El. And I know you hate it—"

"It's okay. I understand."

Jim looked at her incredulously. "Really, that's it? You're not going to throw some furniture at me?"

She had the decency to look abashed. "I messed up. I think I messed up bad."

5. In Which a Wrench is Thrown

Summary for the Chapter:

We let all the truths out.

Notes for the Chapter:

I want KFC so bad rn. But they are closed. :(

“I talked to the woman over the phone. It’s fixed. Said you were the sister to some high-schooler—”

“Not just the woman and her child, and not just Mama and the call Becky made,” El looked down. “I didn’t tell you that Mama could speak to me, in here.” She tapped her head.

“You got to talk with your mama? El, that’s amazing.” Jim’s stomach dropped wondering if she wanted to leave him. He also hadn’t known Becky made a call. That could be trouble.

El nodded. “It was amazing. But it was scary, the things she wanted me to see. She showed me what they did to her brain to make her the way she is.”

“But she was still aware of you. That’s a big deal. When all this blows over, you can visit her if you’d like. I don’t know that it would ever be safe for you to live there, though.” And he meant it, and not because he wanted to keep her. He hated having to tell her that.

She shook her head. “I might like to visit, but I don’t think Becky will want me to return.”

Hopper wondered if she accidentally trashed the place. He also remembered that he didn’t let the officer on duty read any of Flo’s messages she might have for him. “What happened, El?”

El swallowed with difficulty. “Mama showed me things. She showed me the day she had to go to the hospital and Papa was there and took me away. There was blood everywhere. She showed me how she loaded up a gun and went to come get me. She found me before they

took her away to hurt her. But she also showed me the little girl I was playing with, and it felt like that was the reason she wanted to speak to me. She wanted me to find her.”

“And you found her.” Hopper sighed. He sincerely doubted that Terry Ives had meant for her daughter to jump into potential danger. Chances were the girl was just in an important memory. With El being the eleventh, of course there were more. Of course, Terry may believe that if El was free, then looking for others would be the thing to do.

“I did. Mama had some papers, like you do, but I wasn’t able to see her with the TV, so I went to rest—”

“—papers? What kind of papers?” Brenner would’ve made sure any important papers had been removed.”

“Of other kids. Kids like me who were taken.”

Lucas shook his head. “Brenner would’ve destroyed any papers. He wasn’t that careless. Those papers were there to be found. He wanted them found.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” Nancy said. “Unless it’s meant to lead you back to him. And he’s dead.”

El looked stricken, and tears started to fall. Everyone stared at her in disbelief. Before anyone could ask, Jim wanted El to continue. “Finish the story, El.”

El wiped her eyes and Will rubbed her back. “I found her then. I woke up, and went to find Becky, but she was on the phone, and I heard her mention you and Joyce, and I knew I had to leave. I knew that I’d put her in danger. I understood why you get so mad, so I took some money, and went to find my sister.”

“She was your sister? Well, I guess that would be a good reason for her to want you to find—”

El shook her head. “No, but like me. Number 8.”

“Oh my God,” Joyce whispered horrified. “I knew there had to be

more. I just didn't like to think about it. Would Dr. Owens know?"

"He may not be privy to that information. He was part of the clean up. I'll need to go back to Becky's place to get what information she has, but I've got to do it safely. If the information has been compromised, maybe we can figure out how." Hopper looked back at El. "Where was she?"

"Chicago."

"Chicago? You went to Chicago? Did you find another nice man with a big truck to take you this time?"

"No, I didn't. I took the bus." El glared.

Jim breathed a sigh in relief. Everyone had. "Tell me about her."

"She was happy to meet me, and when she found out what I could do, she told me what she could do. And what we could do together."

"What is it she can do?"

"She makes people see things she wants them to see. She made me a butterfly. And she also made us invisible."

Dustin swooned.

"And what could you do together?"

"We find and punish the bad men."

Which could also be a trap. Jesus. Jim wracked his brain for any breaking news from the past few days, but he'd been busy fighting beings from another dimension, so his mind had been elsewhere. "What did you do, El?"

She looked ashamed. "I *couldn't* do it. I found the man who hurt Mama, and we went to him, but he was a Papa, and even though he was bad, I couldn't kill him, and I couldn't let Kali kill him either. She wasn't very happy with me."

"So he knows you're still alive."

“Yes.”

“Well, shit.”

“Yes, shit.” Everyone at the table laughed reluctantly.

“Why did you come back? Not that I’m not thankful. I’m happy you did. But with them you were free.” He was a little afraid of the answer. That she was only back for a little bit.

“It wasn’t what I thought. I wanted to come back, and I thought of home and then I saw you, and you were in trouble, and I saw Mike, and he was yelling, and it all disappeared. So, I got back on a bus to come home. I couldn’t concentrate, but I was able to find Will, and he wasn’t in a good place, so I came straight here.”

“I’m glad you did,” Mike squeezed her hand.

“Me, too.”

“And your sister? Kali?”

“She didn’t want me to go. I think she’s pretty upset, but we had to leave quickly because the police found us. They went one way, I went another.”

“I’ll have a couple of papers sent down from Chicago, and see what I can find out. I have access to a few other things that might give me information. But I have to be careful. Our number one priority is making sure Number 11 never resurfaced. If it’s too late for that, then we need to make sure they don’t come to Hawkins looking for you. At this point they think you are gone or off with your sister, and if you are either of those things, you aren’t likely to be in Hawkins, so it may not be as bad as we think. Unless there’s something else.”

El looked down at her empty plate. She didn’t want to tell this part. “The bad man told us he would take us to Brenner if we spared his life.”

There was a clamor of voices, and Mike’s chair scraped loudly as he sat up straighter. “You know what this means, right?”

"It means he was lying," Hopper said with as much surety as he could muster. He didn't want to deal with the likes of Brenner. He was worse than any monster they'd faced.

"He swore he wasn't lying. And I've been too scared to look."

"Don't look, El. Don't. Don't look for the other bad man either. We saw Brenner get eaten, so if he's alive, he's like you."

"Shit," Hopper hissed.

"But, not exactly. It sounds like he might be like your sister." Mike became animated as he was figuring it all out. "He can't find you, and he doesn't have access to people who could, or you would have been found. Even if he'd been hiding himself, it's been a year, and there's just been too much time where he could've easily taken you."

Hopper nodded, thankful again that these kids were geniuses under pressure. "He's right. He can't find you, but there's a lot we don't know. We don't know what the bad man told Brenner, if anything. I'll run this by Dr. Owens once I feel like the dust has settled."

"Why can't I try to find him or the bad man?" She asked Mike.

"Well, like Hopper said, there's a lot we don't know. But if he's alive, and if the bad man told him about you and your sister, he might somehow be able to manipulate what you see. Even in the void. If he knows that you know he's alive, he will assume you'll go look. He might be able to feel you. Some nights I think I did, but we'd need to test it somehow, and not just with me. It has to be a fair test, and there's—"

Dustin interrupted. "Yes! We can pick a time each night for a few weeks, and El has to randomly do her mind thing—"

"But doesn't that make you tired? That many nosebleeds can't be good," Lucas said reasonably, and both Mike and Dustin deflated.

But El shook her head. "I don't bleed when I go into the void anymore. It doesn't make me tired. Sometimes I slip in when I'm already tired." She looked at Hopper to see if she could figure out what he was feeling. She'd been scared, but her trip had given them

information they might not've had otherwise.

"I guess it would keep you from getting bored while I've got you on further house arrest. But you need a good plan, and you'd need to stop if you get tired or distracted." He looked directly at her. "And not because I'm trying to punish you. If you're too tired it messes up the test, and then it's pointless."

"I understand."

"We can define the parameters of the test when we get home because they can't know." He pointed to the kids around the table. "It has to be separate from when you visit Mike, which I know you're going to do whether I like it or not."

She looked at Mike and noticed how his cheeks went slightly ruddy. She grabbed his hand under the table, and he entwined their fingers.

"Are we going to find the others?" Dustin asked abruptly.

"Who?"

Everyone looked at him. "You know, the other numbers."

"No." Hopper's tone was final.

The kids around the table looked horrified at the thought.

"Look we don't know what we're dealing with here. It's not that I don't want to save them. For all we know Numbers 1 and 2 could be running the show. Brenner could be a goddamn number. We have to be smart about this. And I don't want you to go looking either, El. I'm even worried your sister could manipulate your thoughts."

El shook her head. "I don't want to look for her, yet. I feel bad for hurting her. I was thinking of checking one of the others she was with, but not yet. I feel...not good about it."

"I can keep an eye on out of state news. Anything."

"Oh shit. Bauman." Nancy shook her head. She couldn't believe she'd forgotten.

“Bauman? What about that hack?”

“Barb’s parents are selling their house to pay him, and I couldn’t let that happen.”

“Fucking Bauman. What did you do?” Hopper’s hands itched for another cigarette and El kicked him under the table.

“I called Barb’s parents knowing that someone would be listening, and told her mother to meet me at the park. That I had information for her.”

Jonathan cleared his throat. “Nancy and I bought some equipment to record conversations, and when we showed up at the park, we knew we were being watched, and we were intercepted as we left. We went back to the lab and Dr. Owens told us enough to get on tape. They hadn’t checked for a second device. After they let us go, we went to go give the tape to Bauman. Even told him about Eleven, but that she was dead. He said the tape was too much. Too crazy, so he doctored it. We decided there was some kind of chemical leak. And he mailed it off. It’s meant to get the lab shut down.”

“And hopefully Barb’s parents won’t have to lose everything looking for her.”

Hopper rubbed his face. “I should be pissed, but goddamn, how can I be. Bauman has been a thorn in my side for a year now. I think I’ll be able to handle his smug face, but it’ll be hard.” He stood. “Is there anything else? It’s going to be getting dark soon, and I need to get some of you home. And I need to get my messages from the office and check a few things? Joyce, can El stay for supper?”

El nearly fell out of her chair as she looked pathetically hopeful at Mrs. Byers.

She winked at her. “You never have to ask, Jim.”

“We’ve got it, Chief. I wanted to introduce myself to Max’s parents quickly, so they know there was at least has one girl around. And Steve is taking Dustin, right?”

Steve nodded. “And I meant to mention. My parents are gone to

Japan for the next few months, so if my name stays out of this, and you need another place to hide Eleven, I have plenty of room.”

“I appreciate that Harrington. If you don’t mind the both of us, I can trade vehicles with Jonathan and take you up on some of the snow days coming up.”

“It’s fine. Though if you want to use the heated pool, you have to bring beer.”

The room filled with a loud belly laugh from Hopper. “I’m tempted.”

“Or KFC. I’m easy.”

A snort. “Done deal.”

“Party at Steve’s!” Dustin yelled, and everyone under the age of thirteen joined in.

“*Heated* pool party!”

“Now, just *wait* a goddamn—”

“KFC!”

Author's Note:

So...yeah? This is working?

The initiation. When I was in 8th grade, a few high-schoolers rounded up a bunch of us, blind-folded us, loaded us in the back of a truck, hosed us down, and dumped eggs, mustard, ketchup, and flour on us. I can't remember what else. I don't know if this is something people do anymore.